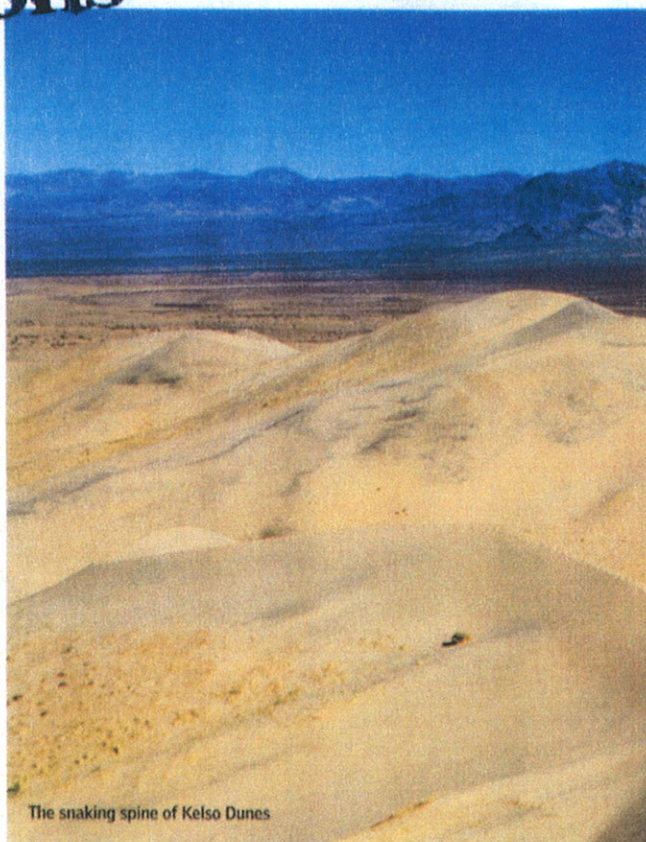


## OH, I DO LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEASIDE

Anyone who has childhood memories of days at the seaside will be able to imagine what it is like to walk up steep, shifting sand that has the consistency of bottomless soft snow. As every upward step disintegrates as soon as you transfer weight to it, it is necessary to make a rapid upward leap with the other foot before this can happen, then repeat the process ad infinitum. By such means, in a parody of high-altitude mountaineering, progress is made in short, sharp, energy-sapping bursts separated by increasingly prolonged pauses to regain breath.

Not only is it impossible to maintain any rhythm, but it is also often difficult to maintain an upright posture on the shifting ground. On steeper slopes, the only way to make any progress at all is to thrust fists into the sand and climb on all fours. This makes the whole adventure even more radical, especially as sand temperatures can reach 60°C.

And yet if you are sufficiently fit and agile, sand mountaineering is just about the most fun you can have on a hill. Because of the softness of the terrain, you can throw yourself around with gleeful abandon without fear of harm. Reaching the summit becomes a ridiculously addictive challenge. And as for coming down – what could beat the sheer whooping delight of rediscovering the child within on an uninhibited sand glissade?



The snaking spine of Kelso Dunes

occur all over the USA, but the Holy Grail is the Big Four Sand Mountains, all of which are found in the south-west. Controversially excluded from this elite group, following debates that rival those concerning the make-up of Munro's Tables, are the highest stand-alone dune in the USA (a 470ft monster in Idaho's Bruneau Dunes State Park) and Utah's Little Sahara, where sand has been blown 600ft up the flanks of the otherwise rocky Sand Hills.

Of the Big Four, the most accessible is Nevada's 600ft Sand Mountain, which lies just outside the town of Fallon, almost by the roadside. Formed of quartz particles ground out of the Sierra Nevada and wind-blown 30 miles before being dropped in front of the Stillwater Range, the seven-square-mile mountain has become a popular recreational area with more than 30,000 visitors per year. Almost all come to ride the sand rather than climb it, for this is the only one of the Big Four that still permits OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) use. Fortunately, dune buggies, trail bikes and the like are not only restricted to certain routes, but they also have to retreat before reaching the razorback skyline.

While most sand mountains are formed of barchans (crescent-shaped dunes), which stand on top of each other to reach ever higher elevations, Nevada's Sand Mountain is a double seif dune. Seif is the Arabic word for 'sword.' Seif mountains are elongated formations sculpted by bi-directional winds, but it has to be said that they look more snake-like than sword-like. Less complex than barchan mountains, their skylines can usually be reached by a direct approach up one of their lateral walls.

That few people hike to the summit of Nevada's Sand Mountain is evidenced by the visitor leaflet, which addresses itself solely to the OHV brigade. The good news is that, once up, you'll have the place to yourself. The route is straightforward – make a beeline from the car park to the skyline, then turn right up a curving ridge to the summit. The ascent begins easily enough, quickly steepens into a gasping hands-and-feet crawl, then follows an easy-angled razorback to the rounded summit.

The far-too-swift descent is made even more gleeful by a unique feature of the mountain, occasioned by the consistency of its sand.